

A Journey of Stitches from Tradition to the Heritage: Embroidery of Swat

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"Embroidery is not the material necessity; it is done for pleasure, for the women's own eyes and for those of her family." (Roland Paiva & B. Dupaigne, 1993:7)

The fertile lands of Swat Valley have developed both high art – stone carving and sculpture which has no further extent after the arrival of Islam, and folk arts; practiced in a true tradition until the second half of the twentieth century. There are enough texts of historians and scholars available to understand the historical, geographical, political, and social structure of the valley, but domestic crafts have always been neglected or noticed occasionally. The preceding lines is a description of the so-called 'traditional embroidery' of Swat, based on two envelope-shaped purses, the wedding gifts of my grandfather; embroidered in the 1920s.

Early decades of the 20th century marked a great change in the social structure of Swat valley where material culture developed. People used concrete houses in preference to mud and masonry. Clay cooking vessels, water pots, wooden artifacts, and furniture were no longer carried in the bridal processions (Kalter, 1991:9), whereas trousseau embroidery was limited only to poor families. Eventually, artisans tended to make mass-produced goods in the market, and young girls took less interest in the learning of new skills; and embroidery was seldom practiced in homes. As a result, folk arts faded away from the valley. Household wooden objects, storage chests, carved pillars and doors, and other domestic handicrafts went to antique shops in the country, or shifted to foreign museums. Textile, due to its fragile nature, had a little chance of subsistence, and only a handful of rare embroideries could preserve by some old women; particularly those living in remote areas of the valley, as their trousseau assets not because of a traditional treasury.

In this context, the study of Swati embroidery is more complex; which has a twofold difficulty: there is almost no book on the subject, and literary accounts are limited only to museum labels or tourists' guides. Even there is no good number of articles published ever since. Secondly, there is not enough collection available for research and scholarly study. Museums and folk art galleries, at this time, seem to fail in fresh acquisition of rare embroideries which are either in private collection or still hidden away in the treasure vaults of the Swati women. In both cases, on hand resources do not show a complete view of the traditional embroidery of Swat which lost its practice, or its quality if exists, in the veer of modernity, and many customs that were related to this craft do not exist today in the valley.

To support the above argument, I am indebted to my grandmother who recently provided me two envelope-shaped purses; some rare and sumptuous examples of traditional embroidery of the early twentieth century, to which we are no more able to observe in the present. These antique purses were hidden in her old tin box for a long time, and now, the secret she revealed during discussing embroidery and other domestic crafts of the Swat valley. She was very conservative and cautious about these items and never gave them to anyone, including me, since I could imagine the importance of her treasury as she carefully unfolded these purses with great pride and showed me. However, I could get her consent to photograph¹ them, but she did not agree to mention her name². She recounts of these purses as:

"At this time, I am about 85 years old, and these purses were belonged to his [her husband's] first wife; her death I do not remember. These items were presented to him by his mother-in-law as a present on his wedding. He had nine children from his first wife; none of them could live. When I got married, I found these purses in old belongings. He told me about them and since then I kept them with me. These are only two items I could preserve. And I kept them loving and revered. I do not want to waste or damage them. Other [suchlike objects] he had sold to the English [foreigners], roaming in the streets and were looking for such items and other household

artifacts. These purses must be now of more than one hundred years.”

The above-mentioned quote suggests that these purses must have been embroidered as early as 1920. It exposes the fact, too, that during, or at least after her marriage, such items were not much common in weddings, because she did not mention any of such gifts presented by her mother. Fortunately, these purses are in good condition; their stitches are so tight and complete that one cannot imagine of them as old as they are. From their physical appearance one can easily decipher the technical aspects of embroidery as well as material of this age-old tradition. I should also assume that the fine stitches, professional approach, and command over technicalities affirm this craft on its peak in the period when these articles were produced. From this point, women in the Swat valley must have been in a good practice both in producing these superb embroideries, and handing over the skill to their daughters.

Srinivasan (1996), curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; who has recorded her visits in the Upper Swat, says that ‘a young woman told me how her mother stitched samples to give her a record of the family’s treasury of patterns.’ It makes a good point that the young girls; from her childhood, would have to engage in learning and preparing embroidered articles for her trousseau. Women were also decorated daily garments for themselves and for their daughters. However, extraordinary beautiful work ever produced are bridal embroideries which included clothes with decorated bodice fronts, shawls, bed sheets, pillow covers, tablecloths, and gifts for the family of their in-laws or for some special guests.

In present society, too, embroidery serves an eminent part in the occasions of marriage, yet one can grasp a glimpse of women activities in the past. In the contemporary setup, girls prefer *Zardozi* (embroidery with gold, silver or coloured thread often used with beadwork) to decorate their costume. Though, today lifestyle and fashion has changed the face of society, it is worthy to look at traditional embroidery of Swat in its existing status along with cultures flourished in this region, and above all the Islamic period.³ A study of these cultures in their original areas makes it easy to understand the journey of stitches into the valley and further moves to the neighboring societies, which is quite apparent in the present examples of embroidered purses, and we can observe alike objects in the folk embroideries of adjoining regions.

The first item, a two-piece purse (Figure 1a) is heavily embroidered in fine, dense, and precise stitches in silk with geometrical patterns. This purse is attached with another protective envelope (Figure 1b) with very light embroidery in multicolour silk where a large central pattern surrounds small motifs. However, an attached purse is only a case and this was not common to all purses. This fresh-looking purse expresses the fact that it is not used or in other case very little.

The second purse (Figure 2) differs only in its structure for it does not have any protective envelope. It is embroidered in silk with plant-like geometrical patterns; repeated with definite intervals on the background fabric. Although, the patterns, colour scheme, and style of stitchery of both purses are the same but these items are certainly embroidered by different embroideress as well as in different time periods. This is quite apparent in their treatment. They are varying in stitches so that the beginning and ending of each stitch, and changing of thread is worked out in different manners. The quality and colours of thread also makes them distinctive from each others. In addition, the first item is worked in a more professional way where the patterns, their repetition, and colours have a skillful approach, while the second item is handled with less attention and care; as there are some unusual changes of colour in the scheme. In any instance, the result of both purses is analogous.

Both purses have strings, intertwined with multicoloured threads in a technique locally known as *Bandai*. In the first example, both purses – the original and protective one, are bound with a single string of multicoloured threads ending with a knotted tassel in gold silk (now faded to silver). The other purse has a

very simple cotton string with no extra decoration. The tassel-making was another unique job of women. For this, they used to prepare thick strand; by coiling a gold or silver thread around it, and then interweave into a beautiful design.

The patterns used (Figure 3) are dense, precise, and tightly constructed in yellow, olive green, indigo, and orange with heavily covered surface of the cloth in shocking red or crimson. These motifs are old and handed down for generations. Yet, the women feel no hesitation to copy or replicate these designs into their own embroideries. Though exceptions⁴ are present, the motifs they used are merely decorative ornaments for them, and have no other function; particularly in religious concerns. Dr. Johannes Kalter (1991:139-40, cf. *ibid* 1984:148-159) has a better view of these motifs as saying that the artisans 'who two or three generations ago were putting ornaments on objects were still [not] aware of their meaning. The change in meaning from symbol to a purely decorative ornament can take place gradually over generations.' He further describes that the people reject the pre-Islamic symbols as they determined to be good Muslims (loc. cit.). Sheila Paine (1997:17) is also in the opinion that "the embroideress [in every society] is normally unaware of their origins: she claims they are just patterns her mother taught her or that she found in her head."

The items in point are embroidered in counted-thread technique. The designs are treated in small and very tiny half *cross* stitch; and the surrounding area is filled with precise *running* stitch while the patterns of protective purse have performed in *surface satin* stitch. It is worthy to note that this later style and motifs are also common in folk needlework of Sind, Pakistan, and among the Rajput and Megwar tribes in Western Gujarat, India where it is termed as *Soof* embroidery.⁵ No special tools were used in embroidery except *sharp* or *between* needles. The plain cloth was treated with hands without using hoops or other support (per. Com with B.R. in 2009). Subsequently, hems of finished cloth were lined with simple *looped edge cutwork*, and finally stitched up into an envelope form.

Swati embroidery, like elsewhere in the world, is finite. A minimum number of stitches are used in a certain way (Figure 4), and two types⁶ of embroidery were predominantly practiced almost everywhere in the valley. The *Astari Gandel* (lit. back side embroidery) is a counted-thread technique, usually performed in *back*, *cross*, *running*, or *darning* stitch to accomplish the design. Here the embroidery requires no design marking on the foundation fabric; though threads are often pulled from the cloth for convenience, and is usually produced by counting threads. Each stitch is taken over a definite number of threads whose result is almost geometrical. This embroidery is not easy to handle, especially for small girls, where more attention, skill as well as patience is required for counting the warp and woof of the fabric (Balala, 2000:65-6). The articles embroidered in this style take months or even years to complete. This is why in contemporary society women do not prefer this kind of embroidery.

Another type is known as *Makhiyan* or *Makhi Gandel* (lit. front side embroidery) where *surface satin*, and *long and short* stitches are common which provides a solid filling in the design area. In this type, the motifs are covered with threads placed closed together, and the stitches do not extend across the back of design except some false marks. This style is so popular even today, that very young village girls might also be seen having embroidery in their hands. In the rural areas these small girls; sometimes in group; used to carry small hoops mounted with an old piece of cloth, in streets, and practice to perfect their skill.

Young girls were started learning embroidery by copying stitches of their mothers. My grandmother demonstrates that it was only the daughters of seasoned women who would get their training at home, but girls were often sent to a skilled woman in the neighborhood who used to teach them embroidery and other domestic skills. Some women were literate and also taught basic lessons of the Holy Quran to these girls. In return they were paid nothing but honour. However, these women, or some other professional embroideress; most often widows, were embroidered on demand, especially for weddings. They were provided only fabric and threads while tools and equipments they used were their own (per. Com. With B.R. in 2009). Sometimes they embroidered caps for extra revenue. The major role of embroidery in

wedding ceremonies was, and is, to demonstrate the bride's skill and status of her family in displaying her trousseau and dowry assets; to adorn her new home to satisfy her aesthetic sense; and to honour the wedding guests by exchanging gifts.⁷

In the rituals of marriages, gifts giving is evident almost in every society such as the Banjara bride, in India, presents a beetle bag to her husband; and tobacco pouches and purses made by Syrian bride for the men of her family; or the European girl gives linen shirt to her man (Paine, 1997:153). The purses, in our present example, were also special wedding gifts for the man, presented to him by his mother-in-law on the first visit to the in-laws' house. Additionally, this gift was not included in the dowry and trousseau items which the bride was used to carry to her new home (per. Com with B.R. in 2009). These small envelope-shaped bags, though not necessary, were served as wallets for keeping money, but mostly they were kept with great care and love.

Women were also using envelope-shaped small make-up bags, especially for eye-salve (*Kajal*) which were attached with a small wooden eyeliner (*Salaie*). They were different in that the purse used by men was simple, and knotted tassel in gold or silver thread was attached with its string while female make-up bags were decorated with beads, and tassels were attached at the edges as well as to the string. Such tiny pouches were also evident in old far-off mosques of the valley, until very recently; in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The envelope-shaped purses are also common in the Muslim communities of Central and South Asia. In Uzbekistan and Tajakistan, small bags are used to preserve tea or salt, and bigger bags are used to hold the Holy Quran (Manzo, 1996:134 & Cummings, 2009). The Baluch nomades have purses, embroidered in the same style; triangular patterns in surface *satén* stitch. Equally, this is evident in Sind, Pakistan where women embroider envelope-shaped make-up bags (Allana, 2000: ill. pp. 7,13,16,24,73,78), and a big purse for holding the Holy Quran (Paine, 1997:119). The *Ghilaf*, an envelope-shaped cover is used for the same purpose in Bangladesh (Haque, 1983:226).

The embroidery of Swat valley amazingly resembles with those of Afghanistan. Both regions have remarkable similarities in style, colour scheme, and stitchery as well as in embroidered items. In addition, literary accounts are also unable to describe a different picture of both areas. The Hazara women of the provinces of Ghazni, Bamyan, and Oruzgan; in central Afghanistan, embroider envelope-shaped make-up bags, and bigger one for holding the Holy Quran (Paiva & Dupaigne, 1993:13).

Historical events and relics affirm that the region of Swat has been remained a hub for great civilizations of the world; where invaders, traders, nomads, pilgrims and artisans met. Among them some passed through while others stayed and settled. These arrivals made a great contribution to the culture and heritage of the valley. In Harunur Rashid's (1966: 20) account, "sharing a common artistic and cultural tradition...[the region] was nevertheless a separate entity both geographically and ethnically." However, among the tutelage of Achaemenians, Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Kushans, the White Huns, and finally the Muslims, artisans and craftsmen of the region gave a permanent home only to the Islamic tradition (Bhatti, 1972: 50). The influences of these societies, as a common rule, can be observed in four ways: the culture of invaders and migrated people, diplomatic visits, relations, and trade.

The geographical situation of the region made all cultural influences possible in the valley. However, these influences dissolved in work, and the originality of indigenous arts remained unchanged. After the arrival of Yusufzai Pukhtuns⁸ from Afghanistan in the sixteenth century; yet permanent inhabitants, transportation became frequent, and this area; especially Indus Kohistan in the north, was more exposed to Afghan influences (Biddulph, 1884 Calcutta, rpt. 1986, Lahore:18). Seasonal migrations of the Kohistanis and Gujars along with their flocks of loaded mules and donkeys were there in the scene each year. Traders, chiefly Khattak and Paracha⁹, used to carry products from Swat and barter them in other areas. Several persons migrated from

Swat to Afghanistan due to family quarrels or other reasons while Kuchis encamped in the lower Swat who left Afghanistan. Until the end of the twentieth century many headmen from Swat, Dir, and Bajour used to pay visits to Kabul for receiving annual grants from the Amir of Afghanistan. Men were also employed in these areas who worked as Afghan spies and newswriter (McMahon & Ramsay, 1901 rpt. 1981:17, 38-41, 50).

To conclude discussion, inhabitants of Swat are so similar (with special reference to the early twentieth century) in characteristics, manner of living, religion, language etc. to those of Afghanistan 'that they may be treated as one people....' (ibid:14). Their tradition as well as material culture share many characteristics with each others. It is thus, the embroidered articles in these areas seem to be of one origin. Envelope-shaped embroidered purses, similar to the Swati, can be observed in Baluchistan and Sind districts of Pakistan, Hazarajat of central Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajik communities. From the point of view, the embroidery style that lived in the nineteenth up to the second half of the twentieth centuries can be rightly termed as 'traditional' which has scarcity of practice today.

Modern education is a major concern in changing the lifestyle of girls in Swat. In the urban area, they are devoted to earn a degree in specialized subject rather than to obtain domestic skills for her future. Vocational centers have failed to produce splendid embroideries because of a changed social infrastructure. In rural areas, however, embroidery is somewhat practiced in homes which is conservative to some extent, and indigenous. Much of embroidered articles became old-fashioned, bridal dresses come from westernized boutiques in big cities, and exchange of gifts have replaced with items, such as mobile phone and wrist watches etc., valued in the present society. In this crucial situation, The traditional stitches journeyed too long that they disappeared from the valley for which Shahnaz Ismail (2004:109) once hoped as "all that remains in common with the traditional age-old Swati embroidery is the stitch, which has travelled from the mountainous north to the Lower Swat valley and whose journey is yet to continue southwards."

Notes

- ¹ All illustrations are by the author, and would wholeheartedly share more photographs with scholars.
- ² She did not allow me to mention her name. For reference, I used B.R.; the initials of her name.
- ³ The Swat Valley had witnessed a number of religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, and absorbed their influences in its indigenous culture. They are obvious from their material remains as well as in its culture. Of these Islam was the only religion that made its permanent home not only in this region but also in the adjacent regions of the Indian Sub-continent. This is why pre-Muslim art rapidly disappeared from the valley.
- ⁴ For example, small pattern used in the protective purse, in the present example, is known as *Nenzakai* (lit. small doll) (B.R., 2009).
- ⁵ *Bokani*, a scarf embroidered on white or red cloth with small triangular patterns is common in the Thar Desert of Sind (for detail see Ghulam Ali Allana pp. 36-38).
- ⁶ Other stitches used in the valley are *Zanzerai* (lit. chain stitch), *Sindiyan* or *Sindi Tanka* (lit. Sindi Stitch), and *Mukesh* or *Makesh* (metallic thread embroidery) see *Crafts of the Punjab* vol. IV (2009) pp. 127-28. Sindi Tanka is worked in a detached interlaced *herringbone* technique: a *double-herringbone* stitch foundation, interwoven by two layers of interlaced *darning* stitches. Worked either diagonally, or horizontally and vertically, four interlaced herringbone units can respectively be linked at adjacent corners or edges in order to form larger diamond or square shapes.
- ⁷ For details see Charles Lindholm's report, *Generosity and Jealousy, The Swat Pukhtun of North Pakistan*, under the heading 'Exchanges'. (1982:113-60)
- ⁸ McMahon & Ramsay (1901 rpt. 1981:14-15) comment that Yusufzai, Utmankhel, and Tarkilanri are of the same origin, and were migrated from *Gwara Murgha* (or *Ghwara Morgah*, lit. fertile tract) in the Khurasan, northwest of Zhob, Baluchistan. For more details see Major H. G. Raverty's *Notes on Afghanistan & Baluchistan*, pp. 192-221.
- ⁹ The Parachas originally came from Hazara and have settled in Swat. The Khattaks were used to carry salt from Kohat. (McMahon & Ramsay, 1901 rpt. 1981:50)

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Figure 1. *Embroidered Purses.* Swat, Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa, Pakistan. (c.1920). Cotton embroidered and lined with silk. Entire piece 12 x 18, 13 x 20 cm, (Private Collection).



Figure 2. *Embroidered Purse (Front, Back),* Swat, Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa, Pakistan. (c.1920) Cotton embroidered and lined with silk. Entire piece 13½ x 16 cm, (Private Collection).

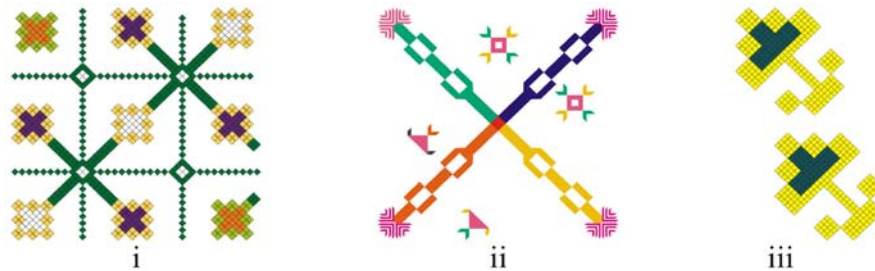


Figure 3. *Scheme of Design* (design repeats from: i. Fig. 1a; ii. Fig. 1b; iii. Fig. 2).

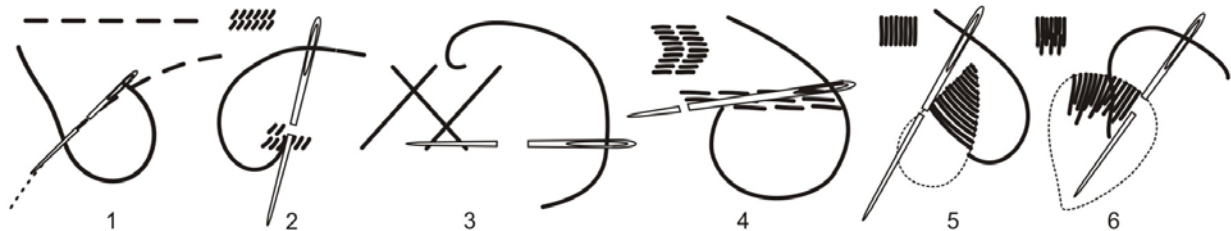


Figure 4. *Common Stitches:* 1. Running stitch; 2. Cross stitch (half); 3. Herringbone stitch; 4. Darning stitch; 5. Satin stitch (surface); 6. Long and short stitch.